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SUBJECT: SPECIAL MEDIA REACTION: BUSH'S VISIT TO THE
MIDDLE EAST

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¶1. Summary: Saudi print media has focused over the past week on President Bush's visit to the region and more specifically on his meetings with the Israeli and Palestinian leaders and his activities in Riyadh during his January 14-16 stay in the Kingdom. Reports on the President's official meetings and other activities received widespread coverage with banner headlines splashed across front pages. Prominent, well-selected color photos and inside pages filled with additional detail further supplemented the extensive coverage. Headlines highlighted regional conflict and security issues. Major editorial commentary focused on the Middle East Peace Process, including skeptical viewpoints, and Iran and the trip's historical context were also dominant. Energy, Iraq, and visa themes appeared within the context of the visit, but these issues were additional themes. End summary.

¶2. Front page headlines featured regional conflict resolution and security issues, mainly the Middle East Peace Process and Gulf security. Key headlines during the visit include:

January 14, 2008

"Bush: Iran is responsible for terrorism in the region"
(Al-Watan)

"Bush from the UAE: Iran is the leading sponsor of terrorism in the world" (Al-Watan)

"The U.S.-Saudi summit discussed today Gulf security and the crises of the region" (Okaz)

January 15, 2008

"King Abdullah and Bush discuss establishment of a Palestinian state and stability of the region" (Okaz)

January 16, 2008

"The U.S. President warned Iran of provocation and urged for increase of oil production" (Al-Shark al-Awsat)

"The U.S. looks to the Kingdom's support to revitalize the delayed peace process" (Okaz)

"King Abdullah and President Bush resume talks on energy and regional issues" (Al-Riyadh)

¶3. Editorial commentary focused on Saudi Arabia's role in advancing peace in the Middle East, the effect of Israeli

security operations on the peace process momentum, Iran and Gulf security, and a pessimistic outlook that appeared in some reports and opinion pieces. Finally, but significantly, a key editorial framed the historic context of this visit in terms of what it should accomplish to make history. Block quotes follow.

"The road to peace"

Okaz Arabic daily opined January 16: "It is natural for the Kingdom to endeavor towards the establishment of a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, so that the bloodshed of the innocent is stopped and rights are restored to their rightful owners, guaranteeing a peace that puts out all wars, nullifies grudges, and turns this hot zone into a land of peace once more. The Kingdom has been working on this endeavor for some time now, and namely through the Arab initiative that was proposed by King Abdullah and supported by all Arab countries without exception. With that, the Kingdom and all the Arab counties have set the path towards peace and have determined its characteristics very accurately.... Today, President Bush is asking for the Kingdom's support in reviving the fledgling peace process....

The Kingdom continues and will continue without ceasing to exert its efforts in favor of this noble goal.

What is required is for the U.S. administration to speed up the momentum of the peace process on the ground and to convince the party concerned, namely Israel, to opt for that.

It is not feasible that while the Riyadh summit meeting is looking to revive the peace process, the Israeli forces launch heavy attacks on Gaza, killing and injuring many Palestinians. Is this a conduct that leads to peace? Does this give a genuine indication of the path that leads to a settlement and to stability? Or is Israel still thinking about peace in its very own way? The requirement now is for Israel to determine its true direction and for the U.S. administration to put a stop to what is happening on the ground so that the opportunity does not escape us and we end

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up at square one again."

"Gaza aggression is a message to Bush"

Al-Watan Arabic daily editorialized January 16: "Israel could have postponed its aggression against Gaza yesterday until President George Bush left the country.... But Israeli officials wanted to send an urgent message to President Bush, mainly telling him that the Annapolis decisions and all that has been achieved during his talks in occupied Jerusalem and Ramallah are nothing more than ink on paper, and that, the final status must happen according to Israel's viewpoint, which, since the usurpation of Palestine in 1948 to this day, has not departed from murder and aggression. The fall of the Palestinian victims yesterday was addressed to and for the benefit of the American President."

"The emperor's tour"

Editor Jamil Al-Dhiabi in Al-Hayat said January 14: "Bush is trying during his current tour to convince himself and the countries of the region of the genuine will and desire to make changes in the Middle East. He may be serious about that, but at the end of the day he is not going to do anything and will not change anything. The only change that will take place will be in the words, the diplomatic meanings, and the terminologies, just like when the President urged Israel to end the 'occupation,' which is the first time that the U.S. administration uses the word 'occupation' in describing Israel's control on territories it occupied in the 1967 war. The people of the region do not want new terminology, but concrete and core change that alters the tragic scene.... Will Bush be able to change the tragic scene and grim atmosphere before the end of his term? Of course not, and he will definitely leave the White House just as he came in the first time. This is just a promotional presidential tour in the mentality of the emperor who rules the world, even if the headlines and declared objectives are

different."

"Bush's tour: Is it about Iran or peace?"

Al-Riyadh Arabic daily editorialized January 15: "There is a prevailing assumption in the Middle East during the current Bush tour that the Arab countries are focused primarily on the increasing Iranian threat and that the attendance of these countries at the Annapolis meeting last November was due to their fear of Iran. This assumption was reflected in Bush's speech in the UAE, but may prove to be a very costly wrong assumption. Israel and the Bush administration are focusing on standing up to Iran's nuclear capabilities. The Arabs, on the other hand, see this from a different point of view. They are using the Iran issue to lure Israel and the United States into a serious peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. Moreover, the Arabs have reached the conclusion that Iranian threats find more resonance in Washington and Tel Aviv than do the efforts to achieve peace.

There is no doubt that many of the Arab governments are worried about Iran and its role in Iraq. Yet, the course of worry for Israel and the United States vis-a-vis Iran is quite different. Israel views Iran's nuclear activity as a threat to its security and Iran's support to Hizbollah and Hamas as a military challenge. The Arab countries' concern about support for Hamas and Hizbollah among the Arab people is much more than their concern about the military power of Hamas and Hizbollah. Moreover, their concern about Iran's increasing influence in the Arab world exceeds that of military confrontation with Iran. Additionally, Arab countries view Iran as a harmful force but not as a main reason for confrontation, since the majority of Arab governments believe that the feelings of extremism and antagonism are mainly the outcome of the lack of peace between the Arabs and Israel. This viewpoint was not very popular in Washington...unlike the Iran issue which is clearly popular."

"For Bush's tour to be historic"

Al-Watan Arabic daily commented January 15: "President Bush's visit, the first to the Middle East during his two terms, with the exception of the visits he made to Iraq, may be described as 'historic.' The visit that started in occupied Palestine and then the Palestinian Territories was historic for the occupation (Israel), especially since he announced Israel's right to turn it into a state for the Jews, and what accompanies that in terms of new migration for

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those remaining Arabs. In fact, President Bush raised the fears of Palestinians and countries hosting refugees when he announced that the right of return could be resolved with financial compensation.... The Arabs hope and in fact demand that Bush's visit to the Middle East be historic in the sense that a solution to the sixty-year long Palestinian issue could be found.... What President Bush will get out of his meeting with officials in the Kingdom will continue to be subject to the nature and fate of the Arab initiative. If he ignores and bypasses this initiative, his tour will not be considered a historic one."

14. Conclusion and comment. Saudi media coverage of President Bush's visit clearly focused on two main agenda items, the Middle East Peace Process and Gulf security. Based on the widespread coverage, the President's visit certainly revived local interest and enthusiasm for advancing peace initiatives. The media suggested solid buy-in with key players in the region on Middle East peace, but skepticism about motives, and genuine will, also featured. Most significantly, the heavy news coverage and healthy commentary generated by the President's comments directed towards Iran indicated Saudis continue to closely watch their Gulf neighbor with concern. End conclusion and comment.

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